

# Killer of a memory

Janelle Miles

Health reporter



**T**ERRY Pickard avoids butcher shops. The sight of raw meat triggers memories that haunt the former Australian Army medic.

Pickard was one of a 32-strong group of Australian peacekeepers in Rwanda who witnessed the mass slaughter of men, women and children on April 22, 1995.

His recently released book, *Combat Medic*, details harrowing scenes of Rwandan civilians being hacked with machetes, shot at with machineguns, hit by rocket-propelled grenades or mortars, and bayoneted.

Even though it's been 13 years since the bloodbath, dubbed "the Kibeho massacre", Pickard still has nightmares of the carnage "two or three times a week".

And he cannot walk into a butcher shop without experiencing flashbacks of bloodied, amputated limbs.

Pickard was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and medically discharged from the army in 1997, a legacy of his six-month tour of duty in central Africa.

"I got sick enough I ended up in hospital," he says.

The father of four stopped taking his psychiatrist-prescribed medication for six months during the writing of his book so he could recapture the emotion of the time. He believes he succeeded, but at a cost.

For two weeks, Pickard ended up back in Brisbane's New Farm Clinic, a private hospital for people with mental disorders, as the memories of Rwanda resurfaced, replaying in his head.

He says the helplessness of the situation was what played on his mind the most.

"The killing just went on and on right in front of us. None was spared, not even the babies on their mothers' backs," he writes in the book.

"I felt helpless as I knelt behind the sandbag wall and watched

person after person get slaughtered. For the first time in my life, I wanted to use my rifle to kill someone."

But the Australian soldiers were under orders from United Nations headquarters not to intervene during the massacre of thousands of members of the Hutu tribe by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Army. They were there solely to provide medical aid.

In the Kibeho refugee camp were about 150,000 Hutus, some suspected of being members of the Interahamwe, the group responsible for the 1994 genocide of an estimated one million Rwandans,

mostly Tutsis. The government-backed RPA had decided to close the Kibeho camp to encourage the Hutus to return home and to expose the Interahamwe.

A checkpoint was established where genocide survivors could identify Interahamwe members. Food and water to the camp was cut off.

"Some of the children were picking the corn out of the human waste ... and eating it," Pickard recalls in the book.

"Some of the mothers did the same, but first recooked the corn in tins of water heated over their little fires. The refugees were showing their sheer desperation to survive."

Back in Australia, when he later tried to recount his experiences of Kibeho to a counsellor, he had trouble being believed.

"He thought I was making up a lot of the stories. He had never even heard of the place," Pickard says.

And when he wore his army medals to an Anzac Day ceremony a couple of years after being discharged, a Vietnam

veteran described them as being "plastic". "He said, 'They're not real,'" Pickard recalls.

"It devastated me because he would have no idea. Peacekeeping isn't necessarily a bloody holiday."

Unable to concentrate, the

49-year-old has not worked for any length of time since leaving the army. He and his third wife, Nicole, and toddler Bella Rose, survive on his army medical pension.

The couple has set up a Buddhist shrine in a covered area at the back of their neat, lowset home in Carseldine, on Brisbane's northside.

"I don't believe in God any more, not since Rwanda," Pickard says. "I believe in the teachings of Buddha ... of trying to live peacefully and in harmony with other people."

Psychiatrist, Professor Sandy Macfarlane, said about a third of people diagnosed with PTSD would never fully recover but medication and counselling could be extremely helpful for those with the condition.

He said about one in 20 Australians would develop PTSD in their lifetimes with members of the armed services, police and emergency services personnel particularly at risk because of the nature of their jobs.

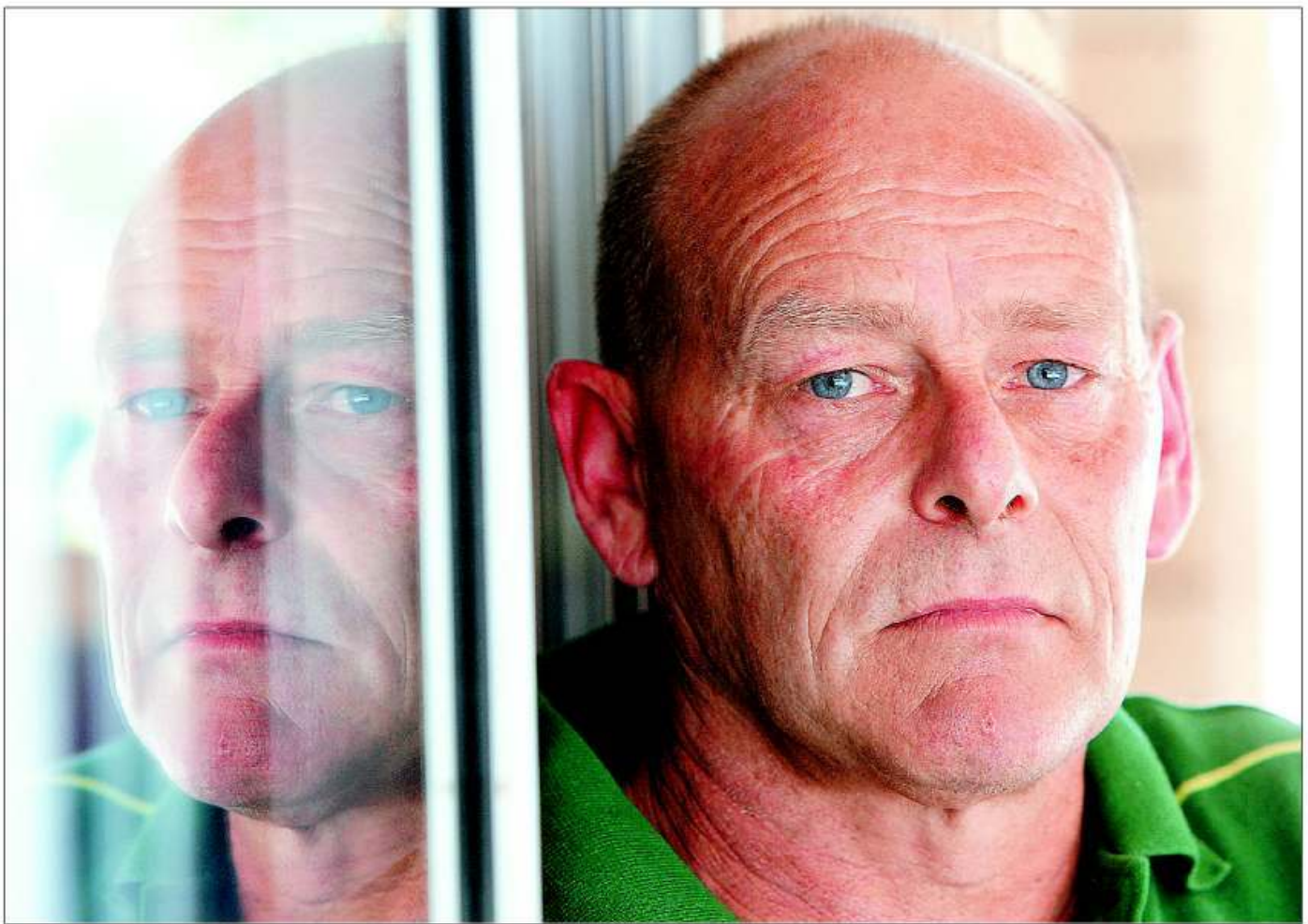
Professor Macfarlane, of Adelaide's Centre of Military and Veterans' Health, said road accidents were a common cause of PTSD.

He said those who developed PTSD often coped well at the time of the trauma but subsequently broke down.

"The memory of the event stays in the person's mind and then ... they're exposed to constant reminders," Macfarlane says.

"If you've been in a horrific motor vehicle accident and every time you get in your car and go into a situation that's vaguely similar to your accident that whole stress response and memory will be reactivated."

Brisbane psychiatrist David Alcorn says PTSD symptoms included sleep disturbances, flashbacks, concentration difficulties, social withdrawal and outbursts of anger and irritability.



People who believe they are suffering from the disorder should discuss their symptoms with a general practitioner and ask for a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Despite the obvious pain of reliving the massacre while writing his book, Pickard says he wanted to help other people with PTSD.

“The actual purpose of the book was for me to get the story out there and also to help the other veterans realise that post-traumatic stress can be lived with,” he says.

“It will never go away, it will always be there but it can be lived with.”

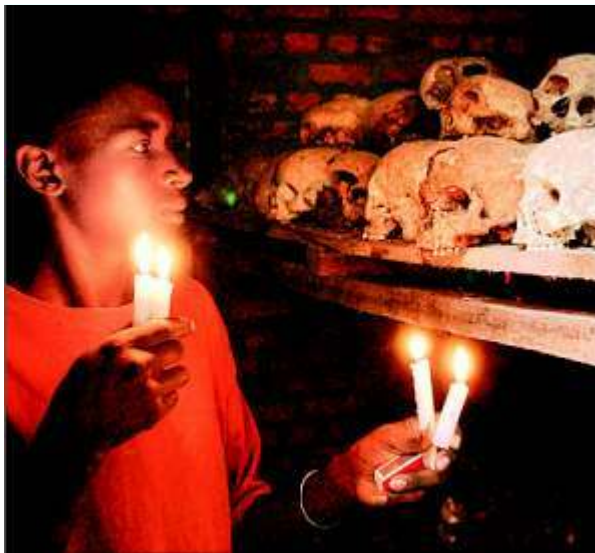
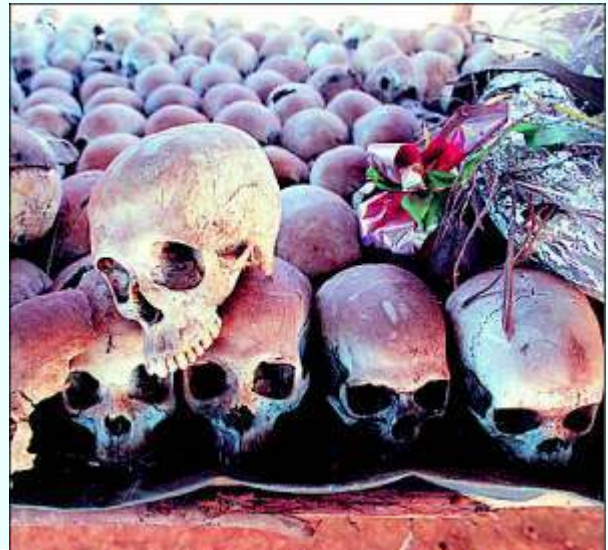
He hopes to return to Rwanda in February for its “Gathering of

Forgiveness”, aimed at showing the world that harmony has returned to the landlocked nation.

“Perpetrators are now living next door to victims and ... are working very hard to make sure that this never occurs for the next generation,” he says.

*Combat Medic* by Terry Pickard  
(Big Sky Publishing, \$29.95)

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**HELPLESS ...**  
*top*, former Australian Army medic Terry Pickard developed post-traumatic stress after being forced to stand by and watch the genocide in Rwanda; *from left*, a stockpile of weapons collected since 1994; skulls form a memorial in a church; survivor Apollan Odetta at a mass grave.